

# NIGERIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS: AFTER AND NOW

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## Abstract

The relations between Nigeria and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics(USSR) now represented by Russia reached its highest crescendo during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) anchored by the critical and great support given to the country during the civil war by the Soviet Union, supplying military hardware to the Nigerian armed forces. This opened the door to a great deal of opportunities for developing a long-lasting, broad relationship in the security, political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. In 1991 the USSR broke up and the Russian Federation replaced it. This work aims to interrogate the dynamics of Nigeria's relations with both the former USSR and the Russian Federation that replaced it against the background of the many colossal metamorphosis taking place on the global scene and the challenges and prospects for strategic partnership between the two nations in rapidly myriad international political, security and economic environment. For clarity sake this work using the traditional diplomatic theory have been compartmentalize into seven sections:- introduction, theoretical framework, Nigeria-USSR 1960-1991, Nigeria-Russia 1991 to present, Nigeria- Russia strategic partnership, challenges and prospects, and conclusion.

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**Keywords:** Security, Sociocultural, Strategic Partnership, Challenges, Colossal, Prospects

## Introduction

The USSR disintegrated on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1991 following years of efforts to manage the growing domestic challenges of communist construction with the pragmatic programme of glasnost and perestroika. As a result, each of the 15 former Soviet republics (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Byelorussia, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, the Russian Socialist Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan,

Ukraine and Uzbekistan) assumed independent status within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

This also led to the collapse of the world socialist system, the Warsaw Pact and the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). With that also went the grand foreign policy posture of the Soviet Union as a superpower and a pillar of support for developing countries in an international environment dominated by ideological polarization and the cold war. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to crises of a new world order, and eventually what many considered the triumph of capitalism in the competition with communism and the beginning of a new phase of capitalist development generally referred to as globalization.

There have thus been some fundamental changes in the dynamics of international relations and the position of all actors in the system. However, that of the Russian Federation was peculiar, particularly because of the many challenges of transition from a socialist system to a capitalist and liberal-democratic one. The challenges posed by this development greatly impacted on Russia's relations with other countries. In addition, Russia seemed to have withdrawn into itself as it tried to redefine itself and its vision in the new era.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory this work used is the traditional diplomatic theory. This theory is based on state-qua- state diplomacy. Traditional diplomacy refers to the interaction of states through their permanent ambassadors or specially appointed diplomats. Permanent bilateral representation is the core of traditional diplomacy (John: 1998). Traditional diplomacy sees states as the only actors in the international arena. They argued that even when non-state actors engage in international relations, they do that through the guidance of states. The main proponents of this theory are Woodrow Wilson, Basil, and Hedley. Traditional diplomacy is influenced by historical tradition. Traditional diplomacy emerged in Europe following the ultimate cessation of the thirty year war in 1648.

The emerging state system needed a method to mitigate the conflict that had dominated Europe, for a large part of the 17<sup>th</sup>C. This method was traditional diplomacy. Both diplomacy and the state system emerged and evolved in mutual reciprocity. The fundamental tenets of sovereignty, national interest, state representation and national security lie at the heart of traditional diplomacy. This is the aim of both Nigeria and Russia in relating with each other.

The fundamental issues of sovereignty, national interest, state representation and national security lie at the heart of traditional diplomacy. There are some necessary qualifications for traditional diplomacy to

function. The first qualification is that there must be more than one state. These states must be sovereign political units, able to exercise supreme authority within, and independence outside the unit (Hedley: 1997). A second qualification is the existence of shared values and interests, which allow states to develop some regular pattern of interaction. Traditional diplomacy is foundationally based on state to state basis just as Nigeria and Russian relations are mainly centred on state relations, hence the justification of the theory to the work.

### **Nigeria- USSR Relations 1960- 1991**

Nigeria established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in November 1960. However, while the Soviet embassy in Lagos was opened in 1961, the Nigerian embassy in Moscow was opened in 1962. This however did not translate into a very cordial relationship largely because of the ideological differences between the two countries at the time. This was the period of the cold war and the Russians were opposed to the capitalist system while encouraging interest in the socialist path to development in the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Due to this, departing colonial powers such as Britain and their allies were opposed to their former colonies having cordial relations with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Thus, relations between Nigeria and the Soviet Union could be described as ranging from cold to lukewarm (Onafowokan: 2010).

Suspicion dominated the relationship between the two countries until the Nigerian civil war created an opportunity for the two countries to discover their value for each other. But the lack of support from Nigerian's traditional allies, Britain and the USA created the opportunity for a new phase in the relationship between the two countries. The Soviet Union was the world's largest arms producer and it required buyers as much as Nigeria desperately needed weapons (Fawole: 2003). The supply of weapons to the Nigerian armed forces was accompanied by the deployment of Soviet military and other technical personnel to train Nigerians in the handling and use of those weapons. This development significantly altered the direction of the civil war. It could be said therefore that at the most crucial point in the nation's history, Nigeria turned to the Soviet Union for assistance and actually did get help as a result of which the nation's unity was preserved.

Dramatically, the Soviet Union became Nigeria's best friend and ally such that by the time the civil war ended in 1970 Nigeria had opened its doors to other Soviet imports such as consumer goods and industrial manufacture. Nigerian youths became eager recipients of Soviet scholarships for higher education in the Soviet Union. This was a major opportunity for the Soviet Union to establish itself in sub-Saharan Africa's major country

(Fawole: 1993). To crown it all, General Yakubu Gowon, the military head of state, paid a historic state visit to the Soviet Union in appreciation of the timely Soviet assistance. However, the Soviets were only able to reap economic and not political gains for their efforts (Onafowokan: 2010). Nigeria became an economic partner but did not adopt the socialist path. The nation learnt an important lesson that in international diplomacy and in the pursuit of national interest, there was no gain in putting all her eggs in one basket.

The most significant highlight of the growing economic cooperation between the two countries was the award of contracts to Soviet companies for the establishment of the Ajaokuta Iron and Steel Complex and for the laying of oil pipelines across the country in line with the articles from economic and technical cooperation agreed upon by the two countries. The project was however not completed as scheduled, and has continued to suffer several setbacks over the decades due to what should be seen as a lack of political will and adequate appreciation of the potential of the steel project to radically transform the economy of Nigeria and its capacity to be the foundation for the industrialization of the nation.

### **Nigerian-Russian Relations 1991 to Present**

The Russian Federation became the successor state to the USSR following the break-up of the latter in 1991 and its replacement with the Commonwealth of Independent States comprising the fifteen former republics that made up the former Soviet Union. The new era was immediately described as a New World Order, of a globally triumphant capitalism and was thus erroneously defined as a period of unipolarity, a period of the dominance of one superpower, the United States, which the overexcited Fukuyama defined as the end of history.

The most critical evidence of this phase is the rapid pace of scientific and technological innovation. The result of this innovation revolution is the massive movement of men and resources and particularly financial resources across the world at great speed with grave implications for international engagements. This was a very difficult time for the Russian Federation as its first post-communist president, Boris Yeltsin, grappled with the challenges of dismantling the socialist political and economic structure and building a new liberal democratic political order and a capitalist economy as well as a foreign policy removed from the ideological framework of the Soviet years. Significantly too, the Russian Federation was economically very weak, ravaged and traumatised by political upheavals of gigantic proportions, with oligarchs and all manner of political groups jostling for control of the state. Accordingly, the country paid very little attention to its relations with African countries.

It was also a difficult period for Nigeria that was into a long unbroken period of military dictatorship which began in 1993 following the ouster of the civilian administration of the second republic. In addition to the domestic political challenges, the nation faced serious economic problems including dwindling income from oil exports, the problem of lack of technology, lack of industrial capacity, inadequate physical and social infrastructure and inadequate capital for investment as well as the resultant problems of low economic production, rising rate of unemployment, widespread poverty, and the resultant social and political ferment all made worse by an unchallenged rampaging global capitalism now more than ever propelled by market forces. Though the trade between Nigeria and Russia amounted to 184 million US Dollars and diplomatic relations between the two countries remained in place, there was no new development in the economic and political spheres.

The return of democratic rule to Nigeria in 1999 opened a new window of opportunity for the two nations to exploit the full potential of their cooperation in the political and economic spheres. This was also helped in part by the coming into office of President Vladimir Putin in 2000 and the gradual stabilisation of the Russian economy and society. It was under him that Russia began the difficult task of picking up the pieces of its international engagements particularly re-engaging African countries with many high profile visits of high-ranking Russian officials to African countries including Nigeria. A personal representative of the Russian president attended the inauguration of President Olusegun Obasanjo in May 1999 and delivered an invitation to Nigeria's new president to visit Russia.

The state visit of President Obasanjo to Moscow, March 5-7, 2001, opened a new chapter in Nigeria-Russia relations. During the visit Russian officials indicated that Russia's new policy thrust towards Africa was to be defined by a commitment and support for the development and progress of the African continent. The signing in Moscow on March 6, 2001, of the Declaration on Principles of Friendly Relations and Partnership between Nigeria and the Russian Federation and several other agreements established a legal framework for Nigeria-Russia relations and the eventual establishment of the Intergovernmental Commission on Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation (ICESTC) between the two countries and laid the foundation for forging mutually beneficial relations and helped deepen economic ties.

On October 13, 2004, President Olusegun Obasanjo, while receiving the Deputy Foreign Minister Yuri Fedotov, in the company of the Russian ambassador to Nigeria Igor Melikhov in Abuja, decided that he was determined to ensure improved mutually beneficial and enduring relations with Russia. Shortly after his inauguration, President Umaru Yar'Adua held a meeting with President Vladimir Putin during the G8 meeting which took

place in July 2007 in Germany. This opened further opportunities for the consolidation of burgeoning economic relations between the two countries. President Yar'Adua was invited to visit Russia and the invitation was accepted.

Subsequently, major Russian companies started to have interest in Nigeria. Russian Aluminium Company (RUSAL) which was interested in reviving Nigeria's major aluminium smelter, ALSCON, bought 77.5 per cent stake for 250 million US dollars in the Aluminium Smelter Company of Nigeria (ALSCON) in February 2007 (Adebajo: 2008. Gazprom, the Russian national energy giant, the biggest in the world, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) on the exploration and exploitation of the nation's huge gas reserves with a new joint venture company to be known as NiGaz Energy Company, which will also take part in several other critical infrastructural development projects, including the training of Nigerians among others. Both companies were expected to invest up to 2.5 billion dollars in the joint venture.

These are very good signs for Nigeria-Russia relations and have led to the slow but steady growth of bilateral trade and the promotion of direct contacts between Nigerian and Russian officials and institutions, agencies and companies, opening up of opportunities for further cooperation in the area of energy, metallurgy, oil and gas and promotion of bilateral cooperation in the cultural sphere. The visit of the Nigerian Foreign Minister Ojo Maduekwe to Moscow in March 2000 on the basis of the ICESTC framework, and the fruitful negotiation with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, was a major breakthrough for both countries because the two countries reached agreements on all the issues tabled for discussion. The parties pledged to boost cooperation across all sectors of bilateral diplomacy.

The visit of President Dmitry Anatolyevich Medvedev to Abuja in June 2009 was a major milestone in the rapidly evolving Nigeria-Russia partnership. This is particularly significant because since the creation of the Russian Federation in 1991, no Russian leader had visited Nigeria, even during the more stable eight-year tenure of President Putin, even though they visited other African countries, i.e. Angola, South Africa and others. The high point of the visit was the signing on June 24, 2009 of six bilateral agreements, including the following:

- (i) Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement
- (ii) Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy
- (iii) Memorandum of Understanding in the Field of Exploration of Outer Space for Peaceful Purposes
- (iv) Agreement of the Transfer of Persons Sentenced to Imprisonment

- (v) Memorandum and Articles of Association on Joint Venture between NNPC and GAZPROM; and
- (vi) Legal Cooperation between the Nigerian and Russian Ministries of Justice (The Nation: 2011).

Several new initiatives have emerged as a result of these agreements, even though none of the agreements has been ratified. The Russians are working with the National Commission on Atomic Energy to build an experimental research nuclear plant around Abuja. There is also the possibility of Russians providing technical assistance for beefing up Nigeria's peacekeeping and peace-support operations. As part of the new level of scientific and technological cooperation between the two countries, in August 2011, Nigeria launched Nigeria SAT2 and Nigeria SAT X spacecrafts into orbit aboard a Russian Dnerpr rocket from a launch pad in the town of Yasny, Southern Russia (The Nation: 2011).

Currently, Nigeria ranks as the second most important trading partner of Russia in sub-saharan Africa while Russia is Nigeria's tenth largest trade partner. But even though the volume of trade has grown from 300 million dollars in 2008 to about 1.5 billion dollars in 2010 and in favour of Russia, according to CBN figures (The Nation: 2010), the result of the visit of President Medvedev in 2009, Ambassador Polyakov thought the volume was still low considering the potential of both countries and their huge markets. The Nigerian ambassador to Russia-Chief Assam Assam- said that the trade relation between Nigeria and Russia was lopsided on the side of Russia. According to him in the spent part of 2013 Russia exports 360 million US Dollars about 56 billion Naira worth of goods to Nigeria, and Nigeria exported nothing (Punch: 2013). However, he said that Nigeria had commenced moves to address the trade imbalance by wooing Russian chamber of commerce with investment opportunities in the oil and gas industry within the Niger-Delta and also in working on developing markets for non-oil exports to boost trade with Russia.

Some trade facilitation through incentives could help improve the situation. Russia needs agricultural products and agricultural raw materials and even consumer items which Nigeria could supply with improved agricultural and industrial production. In this regard, Bondarenko (The Nation: 2010) had suggested the need for trade preferences for African products exported directly by African companies but not for trade mediated by third countries or companies to boost trade.

### **Nigeria-Russia Strategic Partnership**

A strategic partnership is a long-term commitment between two parties for the purpose of achieving specific goals (Wondra: 2008). Just like in business, strategic partnership between states is a formal alliance between

two nations, usually formalised in an agreement to advance the interests of both parties (Grant: 2008). This is why national strategic alliances can help preserve delicate economic interests and promote the achievement of critical national aspirations in the long term.

Accordingly, there are many objective reasons why Russia should be a strategic partner for Nigeria. It has been argued that the two countries exhibit commonalities which should contribute to strengthening their relations. These include the practice of federalism, the fact that they are regional leaders, have about the same population size, they are also countries in transition-advancing from authoritarian rule to democracy-and are endowed with immense human and material resources including agricultural land and hydrocarbon (Eze: 2010). It is however an exaggeration for Eze to put Russia in the same economic category as Nigeria. He had argued that Nigeria and Russia share similar economic and developmental problems of infrastructural development, education, housing, Medicare, pension matters, high unemployment rate and problems associated with property rights, corruption and environmental pollution. Definitely, Russia is a more advanced country, a member of the G8, with great industrial, scientific-technological capabilities from which Nigeria could benefit immediately.

Changing dynamics of national and global politics have made Russia, a once upon a time superpower, to be today a member of the “medium power” group known as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China to which has just been added South Africa, necessitating the changing of the acronym to BRICS). Nigeria also belongs to the D8 (Iran, Indonesia, Egypt, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Turkey and Pakistan. The two nations are obviously looking for avenues to promote their interests in an increasingly complex international environment and especially with the emergence of China and India as new global economic powers. Their search for global relevance and economic prosperity should draw them closer to each other.

At this particular historical moment, Russia has a lot to offer Nigeria in terms of technological support in several critical areas as already indicated in their bilateral agreements. In addition, the Russians have a track record of nurturing several countries to industrial success through strategic partnership. Such countries include China, India and Egypt just to name few. It was the Soviet Union that helped to lay the foundation of the economic development of China, constructing several critical industrial complexes and deploying its engineers to help the Chinese. It must however be understood that the Chinese leadership under Chairman Mao was particularly dedicated in pursuing the course of strategic partnership with the Soviet Union. After the victory of the Chinese communists in 1949, thousands of Russian advisers were sent to China to train Chinese technicians, while a large number of Chinese students was sent to the Soviet Union for training (Hyer:



2005). Mao launched a blueprint for the industrialization of China in 1953 on the background of fifty-three critical projects which Josef Stalin agreed to supply an additional ninety-one which Stalin's successor Nikita Krushchev also agreed to sell to China (Juang Chang: 2006).

Indian leaders, particularly Indira Gandhi, also found in the Soviet Union a strategic partner, following up on cooperation with the Soviet Union and gaining in the process the trust and support of the Soviets for the construction of giant industrial complexes which the Indians doggedly nurtured to play a critical role in the development of their country. Russia stood by India in trying times and contributed to India's national security interests, providing muscle to the Indian armed forces by supplying advanced military hardware, predominantly underwriting India's economic growth (Kaplila: 2010).

Though diplomatic relations between Egypt and USSR were established in 1943, and the first economic cooperation agreement between them was signed in 1948, it was Gamal Nasser who saw the potential of strategic partnership with the Soviets and deliberately cultivated them to help in the task of economic development. In the 1950s and 1960s, thousands of Soviet specialists were sent to Egypt to assist in the building of factories, plants and infrastructure, including the monumental Aswan High Dam, which become the symbol of the new Egypt, while thousands of Egyptians received higher education in Soviet tertiary institutions.

Even in contemporary times, in response to the mounting geopolitical stress in the Middle East, Egypt is gravitating towards Russia to revive the old special relationship with Russia in response to Russia's resurgence particularly from 2000 when President Putin came into office. In all the cases identified above, the recipient nations played a very important role, first, by recognising their needs and second by following up on these and working hard for the achievement of set goals. Even though times have no doubt changed from the 1950s and the 1960s when these nations embarked on their strategic journeys, there are still opportunities for nations that have strategic vision and determination to pursue the vision to benefit from the capabilities which the Russians have and which historic circumstances would help them to share.

Several other Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, are also looking in the direction of Russia because of the perception in the Middle East that Russia could be a useful partner for them as a facilitator of regional power profile and as a countervailing power to US predominance and also as an alternative for Middle East nations' 'hedging strategies' against the US (Kapila: 2009). As Samir Amir observed, despite the many changes globalization has brought to the environment of international relations, including power shift, without changes in the ideological, political and social

systems at the national level in developing countries, any discussion about challenging globalization remains a dead letter (Amir: 1997).

Both Nigeria and Russia are already describing their relationship as strategic partnership. In November 2010, during the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Nigeria to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Russia, the two nations agreed to give new impetus to their relations through strategic partnership based on the historic agreements already signed in 2009.

### **Challenges and Prospects**

There are many challenges which stand in the way of the achievement of strategic partnership between Nigeria and Russia. In the first place many of the agreements signed with Russia are yet to be ratified by the National Assembly in Nigeria. The Russian ambassador, Alexandra Polyakov, had also observed that the lack of legal framework for the 2009 Investment Promotion Agreement between the two countries was responsible for the slow pace of development of trade and economic cooperation. However, while Russia exports, apart from military hardware, metals, fertiliser and oil consumables to Nigeria, the latter exports only agricultural products to Russia. There is obviously need to diversify the items of trade between the two countries and for Nigeria to increase its exports to Russia.

Then Russian ambassador also observed that though there was an agreement on technical assistance for the establishment of the first nuclear plant including the training of Nigerian engineers on the background basics of such plants, the success in this area will require political will at the highest level on the part of Nigeria (Emerging Markets: 2011). It has also been suggested by the Deputy Director of the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Africa, Professor Dmitri Bondarenko, that Russia on its part should extend some preferences in terms of tax exemption or reduction on some goods from Nigeria to further boost trade between the two oil producers.

Another challenge was the lack of direct flights between Lagos/Abuja and Moscow. This was a disincentive for smooth and effective contact as it is more expensive and difficult to move men and materials from one country to the other. However, the most important challenge is the capacity of the Nigerian leadership to pursue more vigorously the vision it has developed through the many strategic agreements it has signed with the Russians, be clearer in determining the national interest it would pursue, and be committed to their realization. Other teething problems between the two nations in their effort to achieve strategic partnership are the Nigeria supreme court decision in the Alscon matter disqualifying Rusal( a Russian company) from being the bid winner for the Alscon Aluminium plant,

kidnapping of six Russians in Port Harcourt(though they have being released after a serious negotiation), and the arrest of 13 Russians in a boat flying a Scandinavian flag that has a Russian crew for having possession of arms in its haul during an inspection in Lagos (Punch: 2013)

## **Conclusion**

We have examined and analysed Nigeria-Russia relations with a view to identifying their strategic value and the possibility of raising the relations to the level of strategic partnership. No matter some of the challenges pointed out, it is clear that there is already a foundation for cooperation in a wide area of interests. Over the past decades, particularly since the period of the Nigerian civil war when the Soviet Union played a critical role by providing military hardware and training for Nigerian armed forces, the foundation of a special relationship was established.

Since then, the two nations have had very dramatic national experiences. When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991 into the Commonwealth of Independent States with each of the fifteen republics of the Soviet Union going their separate ways and the Russian Federation becoming the successor state to the USSR, socialism was abandoned and there was the great challenge and turmoil of building a new political and economic order. Nigeria also experienced political turbulence with several military interventions, a long period of military rule, and a devastating annulment of a presidential election in 1993 which set the nation back politically and economically.

The return of civilian rule in Nigeria in 1999 and the coming into office of Vladimir Putin in 2000 created new opportunities for the two countries to further explore the possibilities of strategic partnership in the new complex environment of globalization. Of course Nigeria could establish strategic partnerships with several other nations. India, Brazil, China, Turkey and others readily come to mind. But Russia is particularly favoured because of historical experiences shared with the country at a critical period in the nation's history, the period of the civil war, and the unique advantage of the foundation laid by the ongoing gigantic Ajaokuta Steel Works which has strategic value for the country and of course the industrial capabilities of Russia in infrastructure, oil and gas and power generation. Nigeria also has abundant solid mineral and agricultural potential for which Russia should be a market, just as Nigeria could be a source of food imports, agricultural raw materials and consumer goods for Russia. Importantly, there are no longer any ideological obstacles in their relationship.

However, for Nigeria to succeed in its relationship with Russia and elevate it to a higher strategic partnership level, there is need for new

thinking in terms of a clearly articulated national strategic vision into which such a strategic partnership could be deployed with a country like Russia with which there existed a long-standing relationship in industrial capacity building through the Ajaokuta, pipeline laying, and other critical projects.

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